



The Huntsville Times

Don't raid colleges for K-12

Wednesday, February 04, 2009

By THOMAS P. DAVIS For The Times
Huntsville Times

Unfortunately, lawmakers are facing tough decisions this year. As we enter the regular session of the Alabama Legislature, we again face a shortage of funds to meet Alabama's educational needs.

Alabama has made great strides in economic development in recent years. Higher education has expanded to meet the demands of a changing technological world. Research, robotics, welding, logistical command training, engineering, medical - these are all part of the various campuses in the Huntsville area. They are making tremendous strides in providing industry with well-educated employees to fill 21st century jobs.

Alabama is making notable strides in specific educational areas. Recently, we ranked in the top tier in data collection. In a national project, we fulfilled the requirements of tracking 10 categories which included demographics, test scores and class performance.

This has far reaching effects from pre-kindergarten through college and into the business community. Why? In today's world, data is powerful. It shows areas of strength and weakness. And it ranges from the fundamental, such as requiring every student to have a unique identifier number for tracking purposes, to the more complex, such as keeping track of every course a student has completed.

But, now the question is what do we do with the data? Certainly we do not want to expend energy warring with educational partners. A house divided is sure to fall.

In this case for Peter not to borrow, but to take from Paul is inexcusable. Is there a strategy being formulated to lobby the Legislature to provide extra money to K-12 at the expense of higher education? Comments already have been made to cut higher education so that more money is available for K-12. Deeper cuts could mean the split would be 75/25 in state allocations.

The lack of money for all levels of education will have severe consequences, but spreading the pain throughout the system makes more sense than bleeding higher education dry.

A new plan: Yes, indeed, the Commission on Higher Education is proposing as part of their legislative agenda a PK-20 Council. Alabama holds the distinction of being only one of seven states without a statewide council bringing education and industry together in a formalized setting to discuss funding, curriculum and other issues.

All indications are that some type of post-high school training through a degree or certificate program will be required for various employment fields. The challenge is will Alabama provide higher education opportunities for students to obtain degrees and land those jobs or will we increase the brain drain and send them away?

For Alabama to remain economically competitive it is imperative to stop draining funds from higher education.

Thomas P. Davis is chairman of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education.

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